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THE BATTLE FOR PAKISTAN

Militancy and Conflict in Kurram

MANSUR KHAN MAHSUD, APRIL 2010

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A sectarian history

Unlike in other agencies of the FATA, sectarian tensions rather than tribal or political issues are the main drivers of militancy in Kurram. The Afghan jihad against the Soviet invasion forced thousands of Afghans over the border into Kurram, where the Pakistani government established several refugee camps.¹ Many weapons also flowed into Pakistan, ranging from small arms to the famed Stinger missiles, and local families purchased these weapons for protection and attacks against enemies.² Thus, clashes between Sunnis and Shia in Kurram looked less like two sectarian rivals squabbling than a full-scale war. Afghan refugees fought largely on the side of the Sunnis in Kurram, and conflicts continued to occur throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Periodically, the fighting would be stopped by tribal elders of both sects.³

Sectarian tension in Kurram has been one result of Pakistan's role in the Afghan jihad. The Turis, a Shia tribe, became alarmed when Pakistan's intelligence services provided funding and arms to Sunni insurgent groups like Hezb-i-Islami, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.⁴ The Turis demanded that the Pakistani government supply them with

weapons and ammunition as well, even though they were not participating in the anti-Soviet jihad because the Soviet Union had not attacked Pakistan.⁵ Kurram's Shia were reluctant to provide shelter to the fleeing Afghan refugees, who were mostly Sunni, fearing that the Pakistani government was attempting to diminish the Shia haven in Kurram.⁶

Sectarian tension built across Pakistan during the 1980s, and in 1987 the first major sectarian fight broke out in Sada, in Lower Kurram, sparked by a clash during the Muharram procession, in which hundreds of Sunni and Shia were killed. As the Sunni-led Taliban rose to power in Afghanistan, sectarian conflict in Kurram reached a fever pitch, and in 1997, hundreds more were killed in Parachinar, in Upper Kurram, after schoolboys wrote anti-Shia slurs on buildings across the city. The conflict escalated, and fighting eventually spread across the agency. It was weeks before tribal elders from both sects, religious leaders, and political agents were able to bring the situation under control.⁷

The expansion of the Taliban's anti-Shia agenda added to conflict between the sects in both Afghanistan and

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MAP BY GENE THORP OF CARTOGRAPHIC CONCEPTS, INC.

Pakistan. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, many foreign militants and al-Qaeda fighters crossed the border from Afghanistan to Pakistan, seeking a safe harbor in the FATA from which to carry on their anti-Western activities. Only in Kurram were these fighters turned away; in fact, around 200 al-Qaeda-affiliated Arabs were turned over by Shia in Lower Kurram to Pakistani government authorities after the Arabs sought shelter overnight during the battle of Tora Bora in December 2001.⁸

During the early 2000s, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, an anti-Shia sectarian group with members who were involved in the occasional Sunni-Shia clashes across Kurram, also established a strong base in the region, including in Hangu, Kohat, and Orakzai. The late leader of the SSP, Azam Tariq, was as popular in Kurram as he was across Punjab.⁹

Fast Facts About Kurram

Kurram, one of Pakistan's tribal agencies in the country's rugged northwest, borders the Afghan provinces of Khost, Paktia, and Nangarhar and comprises three subdivisions: Upper Kurram, Central Kurram, and Lower Kurram. Its area is about 1,300 square miles, and its population, according to a 1998 census, was close to half a million.¹⁰ Each subdivision is administered by a political agent, who reports to the agency's overall political agent. Like the rest of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, Kurram is governed by the laws instituted by the British in the late 19th century. Kurram was made part of Pakistan in 1947 and has been an official "agency" under British colonial rule since 1892. According to Pakistani government figures, Kurram is 58 percent Sunni Muslim and 42 percent Shia.¹¹

Recent Sectarian Clashes in Kurram

As has been the case for decades, major sectarian tension flares up every five to 10 years in Kurram. In April 2007, Sunnis in Parachinar chanted anti-Shia slogans during

their Rabi ul-Awal procession (marking the birth of the prophet Muhammad), angering the Shia community. Shia leaders complained to local political authorities, who arrested some of the Sunni chiefs involved in the incident. The Sunnis, for their part, claimed the Shia had thrown stones at the procession. The situation escalated, and the next day Shia leaders claimed Sunnis had attacked a Shia religious procession with rockets and hand grenades fired from a Sunni mosque in Parachinar. Sectarian violence soon engulfed the entire city and spread to nearby villages, including Peuwar, Karmaan, Para Chamkani, Teri Mangal, Blisht Khel, Bagazai, and Ali Zai. When soldiers in the Pakistani Army and the Frontier Corps attempted to intervene, they too were attacked by both sides, and more than a dozen security personnel were killed.¹² More than 100 people total were killed in this series of conflicts.¹³

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As bloody violence spread across Kurram, a *jiirga* of Sunni and Shia elders from Hangu was convened and managed to broker a cease-fire between the two sects in Parachinar. The fighting stopped, but the residents of the city were forced to spend 45 days under a curfew implemented by the government as the situation settled down.¹⁴ However, sporadic clashes continued across the agency, forcing roads to close down, trapping many Shia and Sunnis in their villages.

Similar rounds of violence occurred in Parachinar in November 2007 and April 2008, and tensions continue to simmer today.¹⁵ Some roads are still closed,¹⁶ and some Sunni tribes, like the Mangal in Upper Kurram, are unable to move because the Tal-Parachinar road, which connects Kurram and Hangu, is blocked off by Taliban fighters, and

the Mangal cannot travel alternative routes through Shia territory out of fear of violence. More than 1,500 people died in sectarian clashes in Kurram between 2007 and 2010.¹⁷

Role of Outside Taliban Groups in Kurram

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan

A second cause of conflict in Kurram was brought by the Taliban from the Mehsud and Wazir tribes of North and South Waziristan beginning in 2006. After the ultimately ill-fated peace agreements between the Pakistani government and the Waziristani Taliban in 2005 and 2006, the militants claimed they were not allowed to use the border between Waziristan and Afghanistan to enter Afghanistan, so they were "forced" to use routes through Kurram to engage in cross-border raids and fighting. This loophole was not looked kindly upon by the Shia Turi tribes in Kurram, which protested vehemently against the Taliban's use of their land.¹⁸

According to a local correspondent for Geo TV in Kurram, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan deputy commander Wali ur-Rehman made an offer to the Turi tribe in August 2008, promising that if the Shia tribes stopped blocking the TTP's access to Kurram's routes into Afghanistan, the TTP would allow them to travel across the FATA unimpeded, and in fact provide protection for Shia travelers. The Turi elders rejected this move, believing that the TTP was likely to draw unwanted military attention to Kurram and suspecting that the TTP would simply take over their areas.¹⁹ Wali ur-Rehman was angry when the Shia declined his offer, and the TTP is still active in Kurram.

As sectarian tension rose in Kurram, Taliban fighters from North and South Waziristan traveled over the Kurram-North Waziristan border to fight against the Shia. The Waziristan Taliban were already irritated with the Shia of Kurram because of their refusal to allow the Taliban



Hakimullah Mehsud (L) Wali ur-Rehman (R), October 2009 // NASEER MEHSUD/AFP/Getty

fighters to use Kurram as a launching pad for attacks into Afghanistan, and sectarian clashes provided an excuse for the Sunni Taliban to attack in Kurram.

The first Waziristan Taliban *lashkar*, or militia, was sent to Kurram by the founder of the TTP, Baitullah Mehsud, under the command of Qari Hussain, a virulently anti-Shia deputy leader of the TTP, in October 2007. Around 400 Mehsud and Wazir fighters fought against Shia in Balisht Khel, Sangina, Sada, Bagzai, and Ali Zai, burning down villages and killing dozens of Shia. After two months, Qari Hussain returned to South Waziristan, and Hakimullah Mehsud, the then commander of the TTP in Orakzai, Khyber, and Kurram, sent hundreds more fighters to Kurram—enough that Sunnis began to outnumber the Shia in certain areas.²⁰

Hakimullah Mehsud appointed Faqir Alam Mehsud as the head of Mehsud Taliban in Kurram in April 2008, to take some of the burden of command off himself.²¹ Faqir Alam, a Manzai tribesman who was then around 25 years old, had a reputation for particular brutality, and according to Taliban fighters under his command, he personally beheaded at least 70 Shia from Kurram, along with a few Sunnis he accused of cooperating with the Shia. After a year as the head of the Mehsud Taliban in Kurram, Faqir Alam was removed from his post because of claims by several of his former commanders that he had become mentally unstable, and he was hospitalized in Peshawar for a month. In April 2009, Hakimullah again began to personally command the Mehsud Taliban in Kurram, bringing with him hundreds of Taliban fighters from neighboring Orakzai to participate in the ongoing sectarian clashes.²²

In another significant instance of Taliban-related violence, in late July 2008 around 30 Sunni militants escaped from a jail in Sada, the main town in Lower Kurram, and a day later attacked a convoy of relief goods delivered by the Frontier Corps in the Sada bazaar. The escaped prisoners, along with hundreds of Waziristan Taliban fighters and local Sunnis, burned and looted the trucks, which were headed toward the Shia stronghold of Parachinar. Fifteen Shia convoy drivers were kidnapped, and with one exception—an 18-year-old who managed to convince the Taliban that he was Sunni—all were brutally beheaded and dismembered.²³ The Frontier Corps force responsible for delivering the relief aid was either unwilling or unable to stop the Taliban and Sunni fighters from looting, and none were injured when the helicopter gunships that had initially delivered the goods fired on the fighters.²⁴

TTP forces have blocked off roads near Sada, Tal, and Dara Adam Khel, where they check Shia vehicles and often kill Shia travelers. No aid or supplies are able to reach many Shia areas in Kurram.²⁵

Orakzai Taliban

Orakzai Taliban also had an active role in the sectarian clashes in Kurram over the last three years. After the death of the TTP chief Baitullah Mehsud in August 2009, Hakimullah Mehsud was elevated to the position of overall TTP leader, and he appointed Mullah Noor Jamal, also known as Toofan, to lead the Taliban in Orakzai. Mullah Toofan, a brutal anti-Shia commander, was a teacher in a local madrassa in the Mamozai area of Orakzai before coming to power in the region. As the TTP's deputy leader in Orakzai and now Kurram, he has enforced a blockade of Parachinar, the main town in Kurram, where Shia have congregated in recent years.²⁶

Afridi Taliban

In 2008, Mangal Bagh's Lashkar-e-Islam and Haji Mahboob's Ansar-ul Islam, both Khyber-based militant groups, sent hundreds of Afridi fighters to Kurram to target the Shia. In the Kurram clashes, Mangal Bagh's forces were commanded by Abdul Wahad, who now serves as his deputy in Khyber. Dozens of Sunni and Shia fighters alike were killed in Kurram, and eventually the Afridis retreated back to Khyber in September 2009; however, there are still a few fighters scattered about Kurram.²⁷ Afridis from Frontier Region Kohat also migrated to Kurram to engage in the anti-Shia violence, under the command of Tariq Afridi, the head of the TTP in Dara Adam Khel.²⁸

Differences Between Taliban Groups

Taliban fighters from North and South Waziristan and Orakzai are in a strong position in Central and Lower Kurram, which are Sunni-majority areas of the agency. Early in 2010, serious clashes took place between forces of Mullah Toofan, who had been appointed the head of the TTP in Kurram, and Rafique Bangash, a commander from Sada, in Lower Kurram. The clashes began because Mullah Toofan asked Rafique in February 2010 to stop kidnappings for ransom in Kurram, because they were harming local

public opinion of the TTP. Bangash refused, and more than 25 fighters were killed in the ensuing battle, in which Taliban members on both sides of the dispute used heavy and small arms. Rafique is said to have been captured by Mullah Toofan's forces and still be in their custody.²⁹

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Local Sunnis have tired of the presence of the Waziristan, Afridi, and Orakzai Taliban, and they want these foreigners to leave their areas and allow Kurram's Sunnis and Shia to resolve their differences. In mid-March 2010, for example, Mullah Toofan's forces tried to kidnap two residents of Massuzai because of their suspected Shia sympathies and were fiercely attacked by a local lashkar.³⁰ At least a dozen of Mullah Toofan's forces were killed, and the injured TTP fighters were taken prisoner by the local lashkar.³¹ In mid-March, Mullah Toofan's men retaliated against the lashkar of Massuzai, and after several hours of fighting, the lashkar and its tribal leaders surrendered to the TTP. Around 30 people were killed on both sides of the conflict.³² The tribal lashkar and its elders promised the TTP that they would henceforth be loyal to the Taliban, and after these guarantees Mullah Toofan freed 22 members of the lashkar who had been held captive.³³

The operational relationship between the TTP's fighters in Kurram and the Quetta Shura Taliban is unclear, but the TTP's South-Waziristan based leadership has said Mullah Omar is the movement's *amir*, and look to him for inspiration.³⁴

Sectarian Militant Groups in Kurram

Shia Groups

The Shia community has two militant groups active in Kurram, but they focus exclusively on defending Shia interests, not on attacking the Pakistani state or U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. The Shia of Kurram attempt to keep the names of the two groups secret for security reasons, but brief descriptions are listed below.

Kurram Hizbullah

Kurram Hizbullah fighters, ideologically close to Iran, are active in Parachinar and send their religious charitable donations, or *khamas*, to Iran. This group is small in size.

Mahdi Militia

The Mahdi militia has members from all over the agency. The group is ideologically close to Iraq's Moqtada al-Sadr, conservative, and rigid. The Madhi militia is much stronger than the Kurram Hizbullah.

Sunni Groups

Although the Sunnis of Kurram are not formally organized into specific militant groups, they do develop tribal lashkars as needed to fight the Shia, and they receive the full support of the TTP from Waziristan and of Lashkar-e-Islam and Ansar ul-Islam from Khyber. Many Sunni Taliban fighters fled to Central and Lower Kurram to escape the Pakistani military offensive in South Waziristan in the fall of 2009, as well.³⁵ Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, a well-known anti-Shia militant group in Pakistan, is also active in Kurram, though it is not as prominent as it is elsewhere in the country.

Tribes and Subdivisions of Kurram

Upper Kurram

Upper Kurram is the most populated subdivision of the agency, and the Turi and Bangash tribes are in the majority. It consists of the Karmaan, Ziaran, Shalawazan, Peuwar and Teri Mangal areas.³⁶ Significantly, Turi is the only Pashtun tribe that is 100 percent Shia. The Bangash tribe is about half Shia and half Sunni, and other small Sunni tribes like the Mangal and the Muqbal also live in Upper Kurram. Parachinar, the agency's administrative headquarters, is located in Upper Kurram and is home to the FATA's first college, founded after the birth of Pakistan in 1947. The level of education in Parachinar is comparable to that in Pakistan, and the city has more than 100 secondary schools, a college for women, and a business college.³⁷ Unusually for the FATA, hundreds of Christian families live in Parachinar, working in government offices as cleaning staff.³⁸

Central Kurram

Central Kurram, which is inhabited by the Sunni tribes of Para Chamkani, Othizai, Ali Sherzai, Massuzai, Muqbal, Khoni Khel, and Zaikhmat Khel, used to be a "frontier region," but in January 2004 the former governor of the Northwest Frontier Provinces (NWFP), Iftikhar Husain Shah, changed the name to Central Kurram. The administrative headquarters of Central Kurram, Sada, actually is located in Lower Kurram, because the writ of the local government in Central Kurram has historically been weak; residents of Central Kurram routinely solve disputes via tribal jirgas rather than going through the official justice system.³⁹ Central Kurram is also the least developed area of Kurram, with a high rate of illiteracy, poor educational institutions, and lack of infrastructure. In the past, residents of Central Kurram resisted efforts by the government to build hospitals and roads, considering it an attack on their independence, but now these people are clamoring for more development and the government of

Pakistan has approved many road- and hospital-building projects to help modernize Kurram.⁴⁰

Central Kurram has been well known for poppy and weapons.⁴¹ Although poppy cultivation was said to be eliminated in Kurram in 2003, over the last several years it has sprouted up in several areas of Central Kurram.⁴² The arms and ammunitions market at the Doggar Bazaar is second in size only to that in Dara Adam Khel in Frontier Region Kohat, and aside from the standard buying and selling of weapons and ammunition, many kinds of small arms are manufactured at the Doggar Bazaar.⁴³

Lower Kurram

Lower Kurram, whose main town is Sada, is green and fertile due to the River Kurram, which flows through the subdivision. Before sectarian violence became so prevalent, farmers in Lower Kurram grew peanuts, wheat, corn, rice, and many kinds of fruit and vegetables for export to markets in Peshawar and Lahore.

Lower Kurram is mostly populated by the Bangash, the mixed Sunni-Shia tribe, but the Mangal, Jaji, and Muqbal tribes also live in the area. Since the summer of 2007, much of the Shia population of Lower Kurram has been expelled to Upper Kurram, as sectarian tension has been on the rise, while much of the Sunni population in Parachinar has been forced to Lower Kurram.⁴⁴

Tribal Elders Working for Peace in Kurram

Although they have not yet succeeded in bringing peace to the agency, the following sectarian leaders have been trying to resolve the Sunni-Shia conflict in Kurram.

Shia leaders

1. Allama Muhammad Nawaz Khatib of Jamia Masjid, the main Shia mosque in Parachinar
2. Allama Sayed Abid Hussain, principal of the Parachinar Madrassa

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3. Captain (Ret.) Haji Muhammad Yousaf, secretary general of Anjuman Hussainia, a Shia political organization in Parachinar⁴⁵

Sunni leaders

1. Haji Bakht Jamal, president of Anjuman Farooqia, a Sunni political organization in Kurram
2. Mir Zaman, advocate and former secretary general of Anjuman Farooqia
3. Eid Nazar Mangal, tribal elder⁴⁶

Grievances of the Population

Since the outbreak of the most recent spate of sectarian violence in Kurram in the spring of 2007, the Pakistani government's role in resolving tensions there has been minimal at best. For the most part, the Pakistani military remains uninvolved while Taliban fighters battle tribal lashkars and sectarian groups, to the chagrin of both the Sunni and Shia residents of Kurram. The Shia accuse the government of not doing enough to protect them from Sunnis and Taliban fighters. Economic concerns also trouble the Shia: A bag of flour that usually costs 3,000 rupees (about \$35) in the rest of Pakistan costs at least 10,000 rupees (\$120) in Parachinar, and many local government employees have not been paid in years.⁴⁷

Shia accuse the Pakistani government of deliberately not controlling violence in Kurram, citing as proof speeches like the one given by Saleem Khan, the former political agent in the agency, in December 2006, in which he said that after March 2007, the situation in Kurram would deteriorate and would soon envelop the agency.⁴⁸ And on March 30, 2007, the then-governor of the NWFP, Ali Muhammad Jan Orakzai, said on a visit following devastating floods in Kurram that the agency would soon face much bigger problems, and residents should prepare themselves.⁴⁹ Both officials were attempting to brace the citizens of Kurram based on information they had received through government channels.

Because of the Sunni blockade, Shia seeking to leave Kurram have three options: cross the border into Afghanistan, then cross back through the Khyber Pass to reach Peshawar, a more accessible city and the capital of the NWFP; travel with Pakistani military convoys, but this is risky as the security forces remain targets for Sunni Taliban fighters; or take an airplane, though private pilots charge triple their regular fares to travel in and out of Parachinar.

The Shia community appears to have been placated somewhat by Frontier Corps commandant Tousif Akhter, who since September 2009 has arrested more than 70 Taliban fighters in Kurram, killed more than 100, and destroyed several strongholds across the agency. The commandant claims that Pakistani security forces now control most of the routes used by the Waziristan and Orakzai Taliban to enter and leave Kurram.⁵⁰

Sunnis, for their part, complain that the Pakistani government does not give them enough support during clashes with the Shia in Kurram. During the March 2010 conflicts, for example, Sunni leaders were resentful that the Frontier Corps and army forces, with bases nearby, did not come to their aid.⁵¹ The Sunni population also faces many difficulties associated with the movements of their groups in recent years: Sunnis who have been expelled from Parachinar and Upper Kurram live as refugees in Sada and Central Kurram, and Sunni Mangal tribe members are trapped in their areas of Upper Kurram, unable to travel through Shia territory to the rest of Pakistan.

Taliban militants plague Sunnis and Shia alike, though the Sunni population was initially more welcoming. However, after years of beheadings, targeted killings, and kidnappings for ransom, both sects are frustrated with the TTP's ongoing presence and the Pakistani military's ineffective responses to the threat.

1 Author interview with Ali Afzal Turi, correspondent for Geo TV, March 12, 2010, in Islamabad.

2 Author interview with Gohar Khan Bangash, tribal elder and resident of Sada, March 14, 2010, in Peshawar.

3 Ibid.

4 Suba Chandran, "Sectarian Violence in Pakistan's Kurram," September 22, 2008.

5 Ibid.

6 Author interview with Iqbal Hussain, tribal elder in Parachinar, March 14, 2010, in Peshawar.

7 Ibid.

8 Author interview with Zaman Muqbal, tribal elder in Parachinar, March 14, 2010, in Peshawar.

9 Ali Afzal Turi, interview, March 13, 2010.

10 FATA government Web site, <http://fata.gov.pk>.

11 Imtiaz Ali, "Shiite-Sunni Strife Paralyzes Life in Pakistan's Kurram Tribal Agency," *Terrorism Focus* 5, no. 17 (April 30, 2008):

[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=4893](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=4893).

12 "Curfew in Parachinar after three killed," *Dawn*, April 7, 2008; Local residents of Parachinar, interview, March 17, 2010.

13 "No need for a curfew, situation not that bad: acting DI Khan nazim," *Daily Times*, April 28, 2007,

http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007\04\28\story_28-4-2007_pg7_10.

14 Ali Afzal Turi, interview, March 12, 2010.

15 Suba Chandran, "Sectarian Violence."

16 Ali Afzal Turi, interview, March 12, 2010.

17 Ibid.

18 Author interview with Altaf Khan Mahsud, former commander of TTP in Kurram, March 16, 2010, in Dera Ismail Khan.

19 Ali Afzal Turi, interview, March 12, 2010.

20 Author interview with Sailab Mahsud, correspondent of FATA Research Center, March 17, 2010, in Dera Ismail Khan.

21 Sailab Mahsud, interview, March 22, 2010, in Islamabad.

22 Altaf Khan Mahsud, interview, March 16, 2010, in Dera Ismail Khan.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.; also see Jane Perlez and Pir Zubair Shah, "Power Rising, Taliban Besiege Pakistani Shiites," *The New York Times*, July 26, 2008.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/26/world/asia/26pstan.html>

25 Sailab Mahsud, interview, April 3, 2010, in Peshawar.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

31 Interview with Nair Zaman Bangash, Peshawar, March 17, 2010.

31 "21 militants and lashker men killed in clashes in central Kurram," *News International*, March 20, 2010.

32 "12 hostages killed by rival militant groups in Kurram," *News International*, March 21, 2010.

33 Ali Afzal Turi, interview, March 23, 2010, on phone.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ali Afzal Turi, interview, March 12, 2010.

37 Ali Afzal Turi, interview, March 13, 2010.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Author interview with Ali Afzal, Geo TV correspondent, March 13, 2010, Islamabad.

43 Author interview with Sadiq Turi, tribal elder in Parachinar, March 17, 2010, on phone.

44 Ali Afzal Turi, interview, March 12, 2010.

45 Ali Afzal Turi, interview, March 23, 2010.

46 Ibid.

47 Author interview with Jamil Hassan Turi, tribal elder in Parachinar, March 15, 2010, in Peshawar.

48 Ibid.

49 Ali Afzal Turi, interview, March 12, 2010.

50 Ali Afzal Turi, interview, March 13, 2010.

51 Ali Afzal Turi, interview, March 12, 2010.



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